



## Conference Paper

# Geek Culture As a New 'Image' of Contemporary Culture

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the theoretical *grounding* of geek culture as a unique contemporary phenomenon, based on structural-functional, evolutionary, and systemic methodology within the overarching culturological approach. We verify the meaning of such concepts as 'geek', 'geek community', and 'geek culture'; explore the role and the characteristics of geek culture as a supra-subculture; analyze its global universal features and the specifics of its Russian variant; describe a unique characteristic of geek culture as a self-organizing system; and highlight the dualistic features of geek culture as a 'marker' of contemporary social processes.

**Keywords:** geek, geek culture, geek community, supra-subculture, consumer subculture, mass subculture, youth subculture, counter-culture, mainstream

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## 1. Introduction

Geek culture is a new phenomenon of contemporary culture entered a period of unprecedented 'explosive' growth in the era of globalization, informatization and consumerism. As a dynamically expanding and institutionalizing phenomenon, it has now progressed from the stage of its empirical description to the stage of theoretical generalization and understanding. This is the main goal of this article. Since verification of both the concept and the phenomenon of geek culture is now in its preliminary stage, the number of available academic research is scarce. At the same time, online resources provide a platform for the geeks' self-identification, and will be used as a resource base for this study. This is the first feature of our research. Its second feature is an inevitable use of slang terms. Anglicisms are an integral part of the unique geek language, which require our attention, since it's impossible to present a comprehensive description of our problem without addressing this aspect.

As a scholarly base, we use the works by M.I.Mikheev, M.V.Dyagileva, E.E.Lunina, E.Omel'chenko, V.A.Lukov and others, each of the authors dealing with various concrete aspects of the emergent geek culture.

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For example, M.I. Mikheev et al. in their article analyze the origins of the word 'geek' exploring its linguistic roots [7, p. 76]. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'geek' is of German origin. It first entered English language in late 18-hundreds having such meanings as 'foolish, awkward, silly'. In 1970s, this term began to be used in the US to describe the students who shunned parties in favor of studying overtime. Later, the word 'geek' was applied to people spending all their time at a computer, to the detriment of other social interactions. We agree with the usage of 'geek' as an informal general definition both for individuals who don't fit with the mainstream behavior or exhibit social awkwardness, as well as for the intelligent and driven enthusiasts [7, p. 77].

Our goal in this article is to provide answers to a number of questions that remain 'blank spaces', namely: who are geeks? what is the place of geek culture in a multivalued classification of social subcultures? given the universality of geek culture, does it have national modifications – primarily, a Russian one? what is a unique advantage of geek culture as a system? and finally, of what social processes it serves as a marker? These questions determine the structure of our paper.

## 2. Methods

This article attempts a theoretical *explanation* of geek culture as a unique phenomenon of contemporary era based on the elements of structural-functional, evolutionary and systemic methodology within the overarching culturological approach. We believe that the defining features of contemporary world are the Internet, consumer society and globalization.

## 3. Results

Culturological approach helps us to define the geek culture as a supra-subculture that integrates distinct qualities of mass, youth, conformist, consumer, counter- and other forms of culture (structural-functional approach); to identify the causes of its explosive growth (low 'barriers' to entry, the existence of 'closed' and 'open' boundaries); to describe evolution of geek culture, its stages and its Russian variety (evolutionary approach); identify the unique characteristic of geek culture as a system – the predominance of self-organizational processes that provides this culture with stability and independence from state apparatus and other institutions (systemic-synergistic approach); as well as to determine the main features of geek culture: its dual character

and its position as a marker of contemporary social trends in the age of 'information capitalism'.

## 4. Defining Geek Culture

The first question is, who are the geeks? To grasp the contemporary meaning of this word, we have to keep in mind its evolving definition. Over the thirty years, the word 'geek' changed its meaning from 'somebody who loves computers' (a programmer obsessed with his/her work, a hacker, a gamer) to the substantial transformation of this term in the 2000s and, finally, to another shift in its meaning in the early 2010s. First, the term 'geek' is losing its negative emotional connotations: being a geek is becoming fashionable, not least thanks to the successful (from a regular consumer's point of view) lives and financial, media and mass-cultural influence of famous 'technogenists': Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and others [1, p. 22]. Second, the denotative field of this word is widening: in 2013, Collins online dictionary described a geek as "a person who is very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about a specific subject" [11].

Today the term 'geek' carries a wide array of connotations, semantic polyfunctionality and the multiplicity of meanings. In our interpretation, geek is a person deeply involved in a certain aspect of contemporary culture, thoroughly knowledgeable in all aspects of his or her passion and creatively participating in a geek community devoted to this subject. At the same time, such person's involvement in a geek culture, in its various aspects, shows signs of demonstrative social non-conformity or a revolt against the normative behavioral role models [1, pp. 22-27].

It would be also useful to distinguish between the internal ('closed') and the external ('open') boundaries of this concept, where the internal ('closed') aspect refers to a relatively narrow circle of 'chosen people' who possess unique identifying features that completely offset their adherence to fashionable trends and, therefore, oppose the mainstream culture. External ('open') boundaries include a mass community that may involve anyone who identifies him- or herself with the so-called 'fandom' - an informal community whose participants are united around a common interest. Typical cultural attitudes to the 'geek' concept create a mainstream aura [4, p. 62]. It is important to note that the low 'barrier to entry' into the geek culture, which does not have any special requirements relating to age, educating, gender, social status, profession, religion, etc., became a unique characteristic of geek culture facilitating its dynamic

institutionalization and expansion. Therefore, the geek community is growing at an impressively rapid pace.

The answer depends on a chosen methodology: whether a researcher adheres to the theory of sub-cultures still dominant in Russian humanities (which first emerged in 1960s), or whether, taking into an account the criticism of this theory developed in 1980s-1990s, our researcher choses a post-subcultural (2000s) approach. By using complementary principles, we may say that subcultural research framework leads to classifications of geek culture as a subtype of youth culture [6, pp. 216–219], mass culture [5], culture of conformity, consumerist culture, counterculture, etc. At the same time, post-subcultural framework shows that geek culture is outgrowing its subcultural status, developing supra-subcultural superstructure and becoming a supra-subculture [1, p. 23].

For example, a non-academic character of geek culture, as well as the lack of social responsibility and maturity of its community [8], aligns it with the youth subcultures. However, today the age limits of geek identification have widened considerably, bringing together young people with much older population. Therefore, age as a marker of geek culture has ceased to be relevant.

Comics, magazines, video games, TV series, sagas, etc. determine the consumer orientations of geeks depending on the attitudes of style, taste or profession – *not* on the ethnic, national or class attitudes, as it used to be quite recently, in 1980s. This provides the geek culture with its conformist quality, with inexhaustible opportunities for producing and transmitting universal social and behavioral stereotypes.

Geek culture possesses some characteristics of counter-culture: games vs reality; leisure vs work; community vs family [9]. This culture is contradictory: emerging as a local form of social protest, it gradually becomes a part of the society. It includes both the elements of protest and the elements of alignment: fascination against boredom and lack of agency over the daily routine [9].

Geek culture has been undoubtedly generated by the contemporary consumer culture that erases gender, class, age, religious and other distinctions. From the very beginning, it possessed an explosive mega-resource for commercialization, which breaks down an insular character of geek culture.

Though sharing common traits with many sub-cultures, geek culture transcends its sub-cultural status, developing a supra-subcultural layer. This becomes possible thanks to the geek culture's unique communicative tools, stupendous speed of its development, its universal appeal, an aforementioned "low barrier to entry", and an inexhaustible pool of IT capacities. We agree with the definition of geek culture as

an innovative supra-subculture [1, pp. 22–27; 2]. Geek culture integrates a multitude of separate subcultural communities that follow the ordinary dynamics of subcultural development, and becomes one of the socio-cultural foundations of the ‘information capitalism’: the trends that in the 1990s attracted a narrow circle of hobbyists, today become a huge spectacle of consumption open for everybody [3].

## 5. National Variants of Geek Culture

Our second question is: are there any national or ethnic differences in geek culture of different countries?

Obviously, since geek culture is fed by the Internet and the global Web, it is dominated by synthesis rather than by analytic distinctions, by the universal rather than the unique. At the same time, various national geek communities exhibit clear differences in mentality. We believe that these differences mostly relate to the themes and heroics of preferences reflecting the axiological world-view of a concrete national culture. This is the first distinction. The second one is based on the foundations, trajectories and dynamics of geek culture growing in different national and ethnic environment.

For example, among the precursors of the geek culture in Russia we may list the following phenomena: Okna ROSTA in 1920s, poster art of 1930s, Okna TASS during the World War II, Soviet ‘comics’ published in such magazines as ‘Ogonyok’, ‘Krokodil’, ‘Fital’, ‘Vesyolye kartinki’. All of this facilitated the cult of invention, becoming a mass-cultural phenomenon and having an indisputable pedagogical effect. In the Soviet Union, there was a system of hobby clubs (chess clubs, radio clubs, model airplanes clubs, etc.), as well as a national network of Young Engineers’ Stations. Those who had an experience attending these clubs, as well as other technical enthusiasts, created in the 1990s what could in geek language be termed ‘the first startups’, organizing first geek conventions, first online discussion boards, image boards, file sharing services and a lot of other initiatives. All of these served as the precursors of modern ‘fandoms’, but the precursors only, since Soviet pop-cultural artifacts (cartoons, science fiction, magazines’ non-fiction etc.) were self-contained: they did not create their own ‘worlds’ and did not provide an expansive ‘background’. [11]

However, the development trajectory of the Russian geek culture had a lot of discontinuities, with decades of ‘standstill’ up to the beginning of the XXIst century, followed by a very gradual entrance into the world trends in 2000s, and then an explosive growth in 2010s. This ‘dotted’ path of development had several causes: technological (computerization and the Internet came to Russia later compared to

the Western countries); technical (low rate of adoption of new technologies); cultural (the deep foundations of classical Russian culture have become closely integrated into the mass consciousness) and others. Geek festivals that began to spread in Russia in 2000s (Igromir, Comic Con Russia, Geek Picnic and others) at first had only a hundred of visitors, but by 2016 they easily attracted some 40 000. Over six years, Russian geeks have become a cultural force to be reckoned with – both in business community and within the larger society [10]. All this allows us to say that ‘common’ features of the global geek culture exhibit their particular and unique national modifications.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The third question is, what is the unique feature of geek culture? We believe that it is its boundless capacity for self-organization. If we explore the geek culture through the systemic-synergistic approach, which interprets every phenomenon as a system developing through the processes of organization, disorganization and self-organization, we can classify geek culture as a unique phenomenon shaped by a defining influence of the self-organizing processes. Geek culture is not a product of official structures, it is not foregrounded in state institutions, and it does not form a hierarchy (except for a hierarchy of interests). Of course, the commercial potential of the geek culture makes it an object of structuring and/or manipulation attempts from the relevant business and political parties. However, the processes of self-organization unfolding within the geek culture are still impressively large-scale. This conclusion finds a confirmation in the self-presentation of geek leaders. “These two worlds – the world of state propaganda and the geek world (or a world of creative class) are developing in parallel: one is on the surface, and the other somewhere under the ice... And this beautiful world is growing, and it is the creative class that will save Russia,” explains his mission Nikolay Gorelyi, co-founder of Geek Picnic sci-fi festival [3].

And, finally, can the geek culture be treated as a marker of contemporary social processes? These processes undoubtedly facilitate self-expression, individual autonomy, cultural diversity and consumption-oriented approach. Geek culture is a post-traditional type of subculture, a collective unity formed within a specific world of community that dictates its own behavioral norms differing from the norms of everyday life. A participant of geek culture always takes part not only in consumption but also in production of cultural and technical products representing his or her preferred version of the geek culture. In this sense, a geek is simultaneously a creator and a consumer, an

object and a subject, an individual and an anonymously collective author. This harmony of contradictions conditions a unique character of geek culture and its members.

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